

# MARTIN BECK: THE PARTICULAR WAY IN WHICH A THING EXISTS

CURATOR: MICHELE THÉRIAULT

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Martin Beck, *Turn Take Merge*, 2011. Video Still.

Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York.

Turn Take Merge, 2011. Video Still.  
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# WAYS OF THINKING

*Ways of Thinking* is designed for anyone interested in exploring contemporary art and its exhibition framework. It offers succinct and synthesized information on the exhibition's concept, the artists and the works featured. For the complete version of *Ways of Thinking* that includes bibliographic references, please visit our website: [www.ellengallery.concordia.ca/2006/en/](http://www.ellengallery.concordia.ca/2006/en/)

This exhibition revisits a set of projects realized over the past twelve years by Martin Beck, whose interests lie at the intersection of art, design, architecture, and historical inquiry. Beck is concerned with shifts and changes of perspective that occurred in the period of late modernism; how their material, formal, and social structure impacts contemporary culture. The works assembled stem from a number of projects developed over time and include investigations into the history of communal living, notably the famous American commune of Drop City; the emerging discourse on ecology and politics at the 1970 International Design Conference in Aspen, Colorado; student protest and history writing in the case of Paul Rudolph's brutalist Art and Architecture Building at Yale University; and the impact of modularity on the exhibition, exemplified by designer George Nelson's Struc-Tube display system. Beck distills from these references a paradoxical coexistence of emancipatory promises and logics of control that run through and between them.

*the particular way in which a thing exists* offers a way of looking, reading, and experiencing a body of work by Martin Beck as it interfaces with an exhibition space that is contiguous to a library, within a university environment. His recent film *Turn Take Merge*, presented here as an installation, provides a methodical framework for the connections and gaps between the works placed in the divided space of the gallery. The film is based on a journey shown by means of directional waypoints (and viewpoints). *Turn Take Merge* also works as a temporal hinge pointing to the very cultural shifts and ruptures Beck considers in his projects and how they are negotiated in the display of video, photographs, prints, sculptures, and artifacts in the gallery.

Michèle Thériault

**Martin Beck** lives in New York and Vienna where he holds a professorship at the Academy of Fine Arts. In conjunction with his artistic practice, Beck also writes critically about art, design, and architecture. He occasionally also works as an exhibition designer.

Recent exhibitions and projects include *Presentation* at 47 Canal (2012), *Remodel* at Ludlow 38 in New York (with Ken Saylor) and *Communitas* at Camera Austria, Graz (2011); contributions to the Twenty-Ninth São Paulo and the Fourth Bucharest Biennales (2010); and *Panel 2: "Nothing better than a touch of ecology and catastrophe to unite the social classes"* at Gasworks, London (2008). Beck is the author of *About the Relative Size of Things in the Universe* (2007), *An Exhibit viewed played populated* (2005), and the recently published *The Aspen Complex* (2012), *the particular way in which a thing exists*, organized by the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery at Concordia University in Montreal, is the first exhibition to bring together and examine projects produced over the last twelve years.

#### **Incomplete Parts (version)**, 2012

Books, shelf, burlap

Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York

A shelf containing books from the late 1960s to the late 1970s about the commune movement, its social practices and impact. The book, the archive and the library where knowledge is accumulated and administered form an organizational core. Reading, writing and observing become starting points and trajectories for an artistic practice and the research that sustains it.

#### **abstracta**, 2009

Five digital C-prints on paper

Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York

Originally developed in the early 1960s in Copenhagen by Danish architect Poul Cadovius, *Abstracta* is a commercial display system and the first of its kind to allow the modular construction of simple and complex structural shapes. The *Abstracta* system combines chrome plated steel tubes, connector joints and accessories to form display surfaces in structured units utilizing shelving and vertical panels.

The connector joint was central to the functionality of the cartesian logic of the modular display system developed starting in the 1950s.

#### **Sculpture**, 2008

Five stainless steel cubes

Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York

A work consisting of five cubes made of stainless steel open to top and to sides. The measurements of their dimensions are derived from a Golden Section progression. The aim was to come up with a progression that is based on the same principle as the Golden Section, but has a narrower range; same curve but closer intervals. The cubes are placed according to the geometry of the space in which they are exhibited. Recalling the aesthetic and logic of minimal art they reference a particular relationship to the art object as well as an ethos of display. Their openness and reflective characteristics examine different forms of spatiality within the gallery.

#### **We were simply delegates in Aspen...**, 2008

Six gelatin silver prints on baryta paper

Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York

Aspen, Colorado gets its name from the aspen tree, a member of the willow family which grows in large colonies around this resort town of the Rockies. One of its characteristics is the quaking quality of its leaves which tremble in the slightest wind. From 1951 to 2005, Aspen was the site of the yearly International Design Conference created as an offshoot of Walter Paepcke's Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies, established there in 1950. The Conference, the only one of its kind at the time, was conceived as a way to bring together business and design interests. In 1970, however, the IDCA whose theme was "Environment by Design" became a site of conflict between the organizers and a group of dissenting participants that included environmentalists, design and architecture students, and a French delegation from the Utopie group who contested the lack of political engagement and the communications formats used in the conference.

#### **Rumor (June 14, 1969)**, 2002

Three pigment ink prints on paper and type transfer on wall

Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York

The Art and Architecture Building at Yale University was designed by Paul Rudolph and completed in 1963 as part of Yale University's ambitious architectural building program featuring buildings by America's leading architects. A prominent example of American brutalist architecture, it had unique corrugated concrete surfaces. Its reception and history were fraught and marked by extensive debate as demonstrated in the bibliography that accompanies the prints. In 1969, at the time of student protests, it was set on fire and subsequently underwent a number of internal transformations.

#### **Headlines**, 2010

Two double-sided silkscreens on rag board

Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York

*Headlines* is a two sided (one side presented alongside the other) silkscreened montage of titles assembled from texts on communes published in various newsletters.

#### **About the Relative Size of Things in the Universe**, 2007

High definition video, 11 min. 59 sec.

Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York

This video shows in one single twelve minute tracking shot the installation and deinstallation of a historic modular exhibition system developed by the American designer George Nelson in 1948. Nelson developed the system under the name Struc-Tube for a greeting card manufacturer who used it for a presentation of artist-designed Christmas cards at the Brooklyn museum.

The title of the video is adopted from the subtitle of Charles and Ray Eames' 1968 film *Powers of Ten*. Another inspiration is Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967). In both films, the movement of the camera is closely connected to vision and perception and shows how scale impacts our construction and understanding of the world.

#### **We dismantle abandoned bridges...**, 2012

Digital C-print on paper

Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York

Commune inhabitants in their efforts towards self autonomy and sustainability would look for and recycle various materials such as the sheet metal used in car tops. A car "cemetery" was located nearby the commune of Drop City.

During the same era in which new modes of social structures and living were being tested, the Apollo space program was in full deployment. Designed by NASA, the program's goal was to land humans on the moon, which it did on July 20, 1969, in the Apollo 11 mission. There were 17 missions in all, six of which landed on the moon.

#### **half modern, half something else (Michelangelo Antonioni, The Passenger, MGM 1975, scene 4 [VHS version, photographic stills, index])**, 2001

IRIS print on paper

Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York

The subject of alienation and identity in a late modern context runs through Antonioni's films and plays itself out in a desert landscape in *The Passenger*, 1975. The seven film stills reproduced show images of a flat spatial perception, of projection surfaces without perspectives. They allow for shifting relationships between space and time that disturb conventional readings of representational space.

#### **Diagrams**, 2007

Five silkscreens on paper

Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York

A series of diagrams that show various possibilities of display within a system. The possibilities present elements that stand on the floor or are attached to the floor; are attached to the wall by means of grooves and pins; are suspended from the ceiling; are braced between the floor and the ceiling; are fastened by means of compression or tension between the floor, ceiling and walls.

#### **Painted Side Up**, 2010

Recycled car tops

Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York

Many domes were built in Drop City using Buckminster Fuller's modular design dome structure. Commune inhabitants used the sheet metal from car roofs to fabricate the modular elements.

The geometric shape of these elements calls to mind the interest in modularization and rationalized production that was applied to the development of exhibition display systems in the late 1950s and 1960s, as well as to visual strategies used in minimalism and conceptual art.

#### **Directions**, 2010

Vinyl lettering on wall

Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York

*Directions* is a mural scale wall text that lists a Google Maps itinerary to get to Drop City from Haight-Ashbury, an area in San Francisco that was the center of hippie culture in the 1960s.

#### **Turn Take Merge**, 2011

High definition video, 37 min.

Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York

*Turn Take Merge* is a video work about the visual mapping of space in relation to memory and history. The work is based on a set of directions that lead a contemporary traveler from the intersection of Haight and Ashbury Streets in San Francisco to Liberty Drive in Trinidad in southern Colorado. Haight-Ashbury is commonly known as the historic nodal point of 1960s counterculture in California; the road that today is mapped as Liberty Drive identifies the short dirt path leading to the former site of Drop City, the seminal hippie commune that inspired many 1960s and '70s utopian socialities.

#### **Group**, 2012

Woodcut print on paper

Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York

As experiments in communal living were tested there developed a parallel interest in and investigation of the constitution and functioning of social and personal relations. Literature abounded on the subject and theories and programs to create cohesion, togetherness and more efficient human exchanges were also applied to modern corporate and business structures.

#### **EXPLORE**

- The display strategies made use of in this exhibition and the ways in which they contribute to visual and spatial communication.
- The ways in which language is used throughout this exhibition.
- Connections, gaps, and ruptures in this exhibition. Where can you identify their presence and how do they function? What do they communicate?
- Notions of time and history and how they function both in individual works and in the exhibition as a whole.
- What this exhibition reveals about artistic practice.

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